

YORK MINSTER; ITS FIRES AND RESTORATIONS.

BY JAMES WYLBON.

In attempting to give an account of the present condition of York Minster, we naturally turn to take a retrospect of those memorable calamities which led to the extensive operations that have been carried on of late years in that magnificent fabric. Premising, then, that, in pursuance of a survey and report thereof, made by Mr. Carr, a York architect, in 1770, the minster was put into a general state of repair by 1778; that from funds realized from minster property, the Dean and Chapter afterwards maintained a steady counteraction to the insidious influence of time, expending therein, say 1,000*l.* a year, it will be understood that only the occurrence of such destructive events as those to which we refer rendered necessary those public appeals, and the exercise of that munificent co-operation, by which this noble structure has been preserved from becoming a crumbling ruin.

About seven o'clock in the morning of Monday, the 2nd of February, 1829, a boy named Swinbank, one of the choristers, while passing through the minster-yard, accidentally stepped upon a piece of ice, and was thrown on his back; before he could recover his footing, he saw, in his upward view, smoke issuing from the roof of the minster. On his giving an alarm, and the doors being opened, it was found that the elaborate and beautiful carved oak fittings on the south side of the choir were in flames: from this the fire spread rapidly, and by half-past eleven o'clock the rich wood-work (cathedra, pulpit, prebendal stalls, misericordias, pews, and organ, with their exquisite canopies, tracery, and tabernacle-work), as well as the choir-roof, about 222 feet in length, was entirely consumed, the fire having been communicated to the latter from the organ. Happily, the gorgeous stone rood-screen, containing statues of our monarchs from William the Conqueror to Henry the Sixth, and which sustained the organ, occupying the lower part of the great arch between the transept and choir, and serving thus as one of the confines to the vast furnace which raged within, sustained but little injury, as may be also said of the east window, which, from its beautiful glazing and noble dimensions, has been distinguished as "the glory of the cathedral," and "the finest window in the world;" the splendid sepulchral shrine of Archbishop Bowet, and other monuments were demolished, or considerably injured, as were the clustered piers of magnesian limestone, carrying the great side arches.

Upon an investigation taking place, a suspicion was found to attach so strongly to one Jonathan Martin, that a reward was offered for his apprehension. This man was a native of Hexham, in Northumberland, was a brother of the celebrated painter of the same name, had been apprenticed to a tanner, was subsequently a sailor, and, about the time of his committing the act by which he acquired so much notoriety, obtained a livelihood by hawking about a pamphlet containing a narrative of his life. He was taken on the Friday following, at the residence of a relation, named Kell, at Codlaw-hill, about three miles from Hexham, was brought to York on the Monday, examined, and committed to the city gaol; on the 31st of March, true bills for arson and felony having been found against him, he was tried at the Castle, before Mr. Baron Hullock, and, after nine hours' careful investigation, acquitted on the ground of insanity, caused by religious fanaticism. Accordingly, in pursuance of that wise regulation by which persons convicted of serious offences whilst labouring under alienation of the mind are placed beyond the power of committing any further mischief through the mania which influences them, he was removed to London, and confined in Bethlehem Hospital, where he died on the 3rd of June, 1838. It appeared that Martin, having provided himself with some tinder, matches, a penny candle, and a razor, in lieu of steel, attended evening prayers on the Sunday; then concealing himself behind Archbishop Grenfield's tomb in the north transept, kept still until the ringers, who were in the belfry in the evening, had left the Cathedral. Proceeding to the belfry, he struck a light, lit his candle, cut about 90 feet from the rope of the prayer-bell, converted it into a ladder by tying knots in it at intervals, and having retraced his steps, obtained by means of the

rope access to the choir; here he cut away the gold-fringe ornaments from the pulpit, and the velvet from the Archbishop's throne, and Dean and Precentor's seats, then piled all the cushions, surplices, and books in two heaps—one near the Archbishop's throne, the other near the organ,—and set fire to them. His candle burnt out before he had completed his arrangements, but he procured a wax one which had been used during the service in the afternoon: it was about the middle of the night that he set about his "pious work," as he called it; he lit the fire about half-past two, stayed half an hour to watch its progress, and left the Cathedral about three in the morning, taking with him the gold-fringe, velvet, and a small bible, for the purpose, as he said, of their serving to identify him with the act. He made his escape by breaking one of the windows of the north transept, which he reached by the aid of the travelling scaffold used for cleaning the Minster, whence he looked back with great pleasure "on the merry blaze which began to shoot up." The opinions which he entertained on religion were of an absurd and fanatical kind, the main objects of his vituperation being the church clergy, whom he designated as "blind guides, who led the higher ranks of society astray." The writer of this article saw and conversed with him at Bethlehem in 1837: on entering the day-room, he found him seated at the end of a long dining-table, reading intently in a large quarto volume; passing round to his shoulder, and perceiving that the work which so closely engaged his attention was Fox's "Book of Martyrs," he accordingly saluted him thus:—"Good morning, Mr. Martin, that is a very interesting work you have got." "Ay, Sir," said Martin, launching into the topic which seemed ever uppermost in his thoughts, and expressing himself nearly thus: "these were the men that suffered for conscience' sake; when I set fire to York Minster I did wrong, and I deserved to be hanged for being guilty of trying to destroy so noble a fabric, for it was against the men and not the house that I should have directed my vengeance." When first placed there, he used to amuse himself with drawing, but his conceptions being generally of the devilish order (according to the report of his keeper), the governors thought it best to deprive him of the means of exercising his talent in that way. There was a degree of wild and ferid enthusiasm in his manner, but still there seemed a seasoning of "as much rogue as fool" in his composition. He alleged that he was prompted to set fire to the minster by two dreams.

Addresses of condolence having been voted to the Dean and Chapter by the Lord-Mayor and Corporation, and by the citizens, evincing the deep sympathy which was felt by all classes, a public, or rather national subscription was opened to defray the expenses of the restoration, which was intrusted to the professional experience of Sir Robert Smirke, and whose estimate of the damage done amounted to 60,000*l.* In two months 48,000*l.* were collected in the county; Government gave 5,000*l.* worth of teak from the stores of well-seasoned timber in the dock-yards; Sir E. M. Vavasour, of Hazlewood-hall, gave the stone, in noble imitation of his ancestor, Robert de Vavasour, who gave that of which the nave was built; his Grace, the Archbishop, presented the communion-plate; and the Hon. and Rev. John Lumley Saville, afterwards Earl of Shrewsbury, gave the organ. From the receipts of the fourth grand musical festival also, which was held in the Minster on the 7th of September, 1835, the sum of 1,794*l.* 4*s.* 5*d.* was apportioned to the restoration fund. In consequence of a deficiency, the Dean and Chapter were obliged to borrow 8,000*l.*, being the commencement of a mortgage on the fabric funds.

In effecting the restoration, the architect's first object was to give security to the fabric; to do this efficiently, he found it necessary to rebuild the portion of the side walls above the arches, and restore the cornice and battlements, and external screen-work on the north side. The roof he constructed entirely of teak, the extraordinary strength and durability of which, even where oak has failed, has been proved by experience; the arched ribs forming the groined vaulting he also constructed of the same wood, following in every respect the plan of the old work: but he wisely had the

interior moulded portion wrought separate, in a light American wood, a method which affords comparative facility for removing and replacing parts should circumstances render it necessary, as well as for executing the various complex curves with greater accuracy and superior finish. In the restoration of the stall-work, he availed himself of the services of Messrs. Mackenzie and Wild, who had fortunately made on former occasions accurate admeasurements of the most interesting features of the Cathedral, well-seasoned oak was collected for the purpose in Holland, and the elaborate portion of the work was executed in London. The pulpit and throne are allowed to be far preferable to their predecessors; the former is two feet lower than the old one, and projects further into the choir: some say, that whereas the old tabernacle-work, while rough in execution, was substantial and richly clustered; the new, though sharp and richly tooled, is slight and thin, and the finish at variance with it. Exception is also taken to the knots in the groining of the roof, which before presented an endless variety, but now exhibits a repetition of the same foliage. However these things may be, it is undeniable that the restoration was well carried out, and what with the drawings that existed, and the fragments found in the ruins, it was effected generally with a satisfactory adherence to its prototype. The new stone altar-screen and altar-rails are admirably finished; this screen and the oak ones which extend on either side from the pulpit and throne to meet it, have their openings filled with plate-glass, which gives at once lightness and comfort, and affords a view beyond. In August, 1839, some workmen engaged in removing the rubbish and paving inside the organ-screen, came upon some masonry, the appearance of which induced a further excavation; pursuing this interesting discovery, the remains of a former choir upon a lower level, or, perhaps more properly, of a former crypt, were developed, presenting portions, as much as 7 feet in height, of massive Norman main piers, 7 feet or more in diameter, their various spiral and chequered flush-rill patterns and bases perfect; also the remains of other minor pillars, and in the foundations of the present structure, many pieces of Norman carving raudomly disposed amongst the rubble masonry. These remains, which prove the former choir to have been narrower, and to have run farther westward than the present one, were arched over with brickwork to carry the paving of the choir, and are thus open for the inspection of visitors, in whom they invariably excite a deep interest: the vaults thus formed are entered from the west side of those previously known as the crypt, and descend a few steps from that level. These excavations were considered to afford confirmation of the old tradition that the Minster was founded on the site of a Roman temple, some walls apparently of Roman structure, with herring-bone brickwork, being found to intersect the foundations. The bases of the massive Norman piers are curious, as being purely attic, the upper fillet of the scotia projecting under the upper torus. In the spring of 1832 the restoration was completed, having, with incidental expenses, amounted nearly to the estimate. On the 6th of May the choir was again opened for divine service.

On the evening of the 20th of May, 1840, the satisfaction which the inhabitants had for eight years enjoyed in their restored Minster was again doomed to be disturbed, and by a similar catastrophe. About half-past seven o'clock the alarm was given that a fire had broken out in the south-west tower, in which were the peal of ten bells, and the clock. The tower being much crowded with timber, the work of destruction progressed rapidly; by nine, the peal of bells had fallen—with crashes resembling discharges of artillery; the same fate had attended the clock, and the devouring element now raged through the whole height of the tower with the fury of a furnace draught—the flames issuing at every opening; by ten o'clock the fire reached the main roof of the nave, along which it extended rapidly, and by twelve the whole of it had fallen in, and lay in the long aisle "like a sea of fire." The west doors being now nearly burnt through, a barricade of planks was raised against them, to prevent the rush of air which, if ensuing, might carry destruction to the organ and choir: by this precaution, and a well-managed